

THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

I. Hanoi's Motives to Negotiate

Many individuals (Group A) in Washington and Saigon concerned with our Vietnam policy believe that Hanoi has consciously decided to negotiate from weakness. They cite success of our current force deployments, the low incident count, a new high in hamlet security, and most importantly, they cite the very fact that Hanoi is willing to negotiate.

An alternate explanation is that Hanoi made its decision to negotiate some time ago, feels that it is negotiating from strength, and is primarily interested in getting the U.S. out of Vietnam as quickly as possible. While it is clear that Hanoi formally agreed to negotiate after our recent full cessation of bombing in NVN, a case can be made that Hanoi itself decided to negotiate as long ago as the end of 1966. Through a series of contacts slugged Marigold, a Polish ICC representative named Lewandowski and an Italian named D'Orlandi succeeded in working out a 10-point program that was to serve as a basis for initial contacts between Hanoi and the U.S. While we should retain a strong suspicion that Hanoi was never serious, it was arranged on two separate occasions in December that U.S. and North Vietnamese representatives would meet in Warsaw. Both of these occasions were immediately preceded by U.S. bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, and the purported contacts never took place. Both Hanoi's and our own positions stiffened after that, but various shreds of evidence indicate that Hanoi continually had its feelers out to initiate contacts after an unconditional cessation of our bombing.

In sum, this may mean that Hanoi was ready to negotiate as soon as that one condition (albeit a big one) was met. Even if this explanation of the timing of Hanoi's decision is incorrect, it could still be argued that Hanoi feels it is in a strong position to continue the war over the long haul. (Most of the paragraphs below bear upon this point.) Its manpower pool remains large, its economy has been growing despite our bombing, and it is receiving ever increasing amounts of aid from its allies. It is equally plausible that Hanoi came to a strategic judgment quite familiar in the United States. This judgment, simply stated, is that severe costs would have to be borne over the long haul, and that its basic objectives could be achieved at significantly lower costs although possibly in a longer period of time by negotiating as rapidly as possible for withdrawal of U.S. forces. This might also explain Hanoi's willingness to reach agreement on a number of procedural points in Paris.

Almost certainly, a lesser important objective of Hanoi in negotiations is to undermine the GVN and US/GVN relations.

2. U.S. Military Efforts

In the last six months our military efforts against enemy main force units seem to be significantly improved. While the announced strategy for the employment of our forces remains the same as before (seek out and destroy the enemy wherever he may be and concentrate on kills), the operational tactics have changed under General Abrams. We are using more small patrols for intelligence and spoiling, and we are conducting fewer large-scale sweeps, and those sweeps that we are conducting are smaller in territorial scope. General Abrams has begun to concentrate much more on area control than on kills. He has been aided in this approach by his defense in depth, particularly around the major cities. Moreover, since our "understanding" with Hanoi with respect to the DMZ, he has been able to redeploy one division from Northern I Corps to III and IV Corps, and to free up for operations in the Danang area a division in Danang being held in reserve for a DMZ contingency. Apparently because of the present disposition and tactics of our forces, the enemy has been deterred from launching large scale attacks and attacks on cities. It could be, however, that we are not deterring him but that he is unwilling to attack at this time because of the Paris Negotiations, or because he is recouping, or because he too may be in the process of changing his tactics.

To the degree that body count is an indicator of the course of the war, the kill ratio between free world forces and VC/NVA forces has remained constant over the last two years (about five to one, with present weekly counts running about 200 U.S. plus 200 RVNAF versus 2000 enemy). Our enemy body counts, according to most observers, has been and remains inflated by anywhere between one-third and a half.

Though we may be tempted from time to time to see the war as growing in intensity or as slackening, U.S. casualties have remained remarkably constant. For example, even though there is presently the appearance of a lull, our killed in action is still about 200 per week. This is true despite the fact that enemy-initiated actions have decreased to their lowest point in the last two years. If we decided to reduce our offensive operations, past experience indicates that the enemy could still keep a figure of U.S. KIA at about 200 per week without more than marginally affecting his KIA count adversely.

3. GVN Force Efforts and Modernization.

GVN regular forces are now much larger (816,000) than two years ago (623,000), and they are much better equipped. All ARVN combat units now have M-16 rifles and are beginning to receive their own required artillery and helicopter support. They may also be better than they were; but how much better and how good they are is purely speculative, and we have in the past been consistently over-optimistic in our expectations. U.S. forces have been increasingly available to join with the ARVN in a fight. All of this has resulted in a greater increase in the RVNAF level of effort (combat days) with proportionately greater resultant contacts with the enemy and enemy kills. There is no evidence that productivity increased VC KIA by RVNAF has been a function of other than size and increased U.S. artillery aid and air support, so the conclusion could be drawn that RVNAF efficiency has remained the same. Outside of questions like morale and loyalty to the government or to the GVN, RVNAF still faces a severe leadership problem (great shortages at captain to colonel levels and generally inadequate performance at all officer levels) and a continually high desertion rate. The officer problem is mired in politics and little has been done to right it. RVNAF regular force desertions (net and gross) hit a two-year high in September 1968. The ground combat forces are deserting (net) at an annual rate of 35% of their strength (gross rate for 1/3 of the units is more than 50%), or twice as fast as the regular forces as a whole (17%). Net desertion accounted for 68% of total attrition during the third quarter of 1968 and equalled 39% of the personnel added during the period.

The RVNAF modernization program is in swing, but not in stride, and the timetables are far from set. Phase I of the modernization program which is expected to be completed before the end of 1970 will bring RVNAF up to 850,000. This will theoretically give the GVN an additional equivalent ground combat capability of 50,000 U.S. troops. The accelerated version of Phase II is planned to be completed by the end of 1972. This will increase RVNAF by another 27,000 and go a long way toward giving sizable numbers of helicopters, artillery and logistic support. This equipment is supposed to be taken from U.S. forces in Vietnam, and the program is designed to be a trade-off for U.S. forces. Insofar as these U.S. forces will no longer have equipment, they will have to be withdrawn. This number is expected to be about 50,000. No additional U.S. force cutback is planned, even though according to the Phase I program 50,000 U.S. troops could be withdrawn without reducing present allied combat capability.

4. VC/NVA Efforts.

One of the basic unquestioned facts about the war to-date has been the VC/NVA ability to match us in combat strength. Many would argue that despite the disparity in gross combat troop numbers, the enemy does field an equivalent force to that of the allied forces. The present ratio of US/GVN/FW battalions to VC/NVA battalions is 1.5:1. Regardless of how inflated our enemy KIA figures may be, there is no doubt that his losses have been enormous. Nevertheless, he has continued to field forces at all levels at a constant ratio to allied forces, and there is no real evidence that his morale has significantly sunk, or that if it has sunk that it does make a combat difference. Predictions throughout the years have consistently been that the enemy is on his last leg; this has never proven correct in the past. The enemy is able to continue his efforts at present levels for indefinite periods of time. Hanoi has sufficient manpower available (NVN forces in SVN represent only 10% of its total regular forces. Also, approximately 200,000 NVN males reach the age of 15 each year.), receives the requisite ammunition and supplies from its allies, and has little difficulty infiltrating these men and supplies into South Vietnam. The potential enemy manpower pool in SVN is also very far from being run dry (approximately 2.7 million males between ages of 15 and 45 not in any GVN force structure, with present recruitment about 3,500/month). In short, it is his will rather than his capabilities or our capabilities that will determine how long enemy main force units will stay in the field and continue to fight. A vital fact to keep in mind is that the enemy can generally determine his own rate of loss. Despite our improving military posture in SVN, the enemy retains the tactical initiative, that is, he determines in something like eight out of ten cases whether or not he will attack or whether he will stand and fight if attacked. Seldom do our operations actually give the enemy no choice but to fight. If he comes to find his losses are intolerable, he can avoid combat and reduce them, without abandoning SVN.

5. U.S. Bombing of North Vietnam and Laos

Available evidence suggests that our bombing campaign from March 31 to November 1 (limited to 19° and below in NVN and to certain portions of Laos) was a more effective way to destroy enemy trucks and materiel than the previous campaign in all of NVN. The CIA considers that campaign to have been the most successful interdiction campaign of the war. For example, we destroyed about 220 trucks per week in these limited areas since April 1 compared to 100 per week in the same period the previous year -- although the difference, in part, is accounted for by better intelligence. The evidence, however, does not establish that our interdiction efforts before March 31, during March 31 - November 1 period or even now in Laos only have imposed a meaningful cost on the enemy, appreciably limited or deterred his efforts in the South, or reduced U.S. casualties in SVN. Intelligence and statistics demonstrated that the more trucks we destroyed the more trucks the enemy dispatched. There is no detectable deterrent effect. Expected enemy losses continue to be offset by inserting more into the top of the funnel in NVN with the USSR, China and other allies paying the relatively modest bill.

Under any circumstances, there has been no evidence that the enemy has had any problem in supplying his forces in the South. Intelligence estimates of the external needs of the VC/NVA forces vary, but most indicate about 40 short tons per day (ST/D) from North Vietnam of which half is ammunition. This estimate is reasonable. For example, the entire RVNAF and Laotian forces (over 800,000 men) consume only 150 short tons per day of small arms and mortar ammunition. The VC/NVA forces are less than one quarter this size (about 200,000) and they consume less because they fight far less frequently and have better fire discipline. The 40 ST/D daily requirement could be provided by as few as 13 trucks reaching South Vietnam each day. Even if the enemy's needs are 3 times our estimate, they could be met with 39 trucks. We must recognize that our bombing did not, does not, and probably cannot, limit the enemy's operations in South Vietnam.

More importantly, the enemy has had and still has the capability to increase his infiltration effort in both men and supplies several-fold. That he has not done so points up the key question with respect to U.S. bombing -- the enemy's intentions and strategy.

Based on available evidence and his past actions, it appears the the enemy has a well-considered plan to maintain a force structure in South Vietnam adequate to achieve his military objectives. This force is provided with replacements and supplies to carry out the enemy campaign. While he intensified the level of combat earlier this year, he probably plans an effort he can sustain for years if necessary. On this basis, the real impact of a cessation of bombing is to permit

him to provide the men and materiel he needs at a lower cost. It does not necessarily result in a big increase in infiltration. It is interesting to note that the VC/NVA combat strength has been maintained at about 120,000 (+ or - 5%) for over two years, despite sharply increasing casualties and a growing and changing U.S. interdiction effort. This indicates careful long-range planning on the part of Hanoi.

The juxtaposition of two additional facts are revealing. First, ever since we began ROLLING THUNDER in early 1965, enemy infiltration has increased as U.S. bombings increased. Second, now that we have ceased our bombings in all of North Vietnam and bomb only in Laos, the enemy has significantly curtailed his infiltration into South Vietnam. He has gone from a post-Tet high of about 33,000 per month to a present figure of about 7,000 per month. (This is a very soft figure.) This latter figure could indicate that he is abiding by the implicit understanding of keeping infiltration at about fall of 1967 levels. This understanding on infiltration is of such a tenuous nature that Hanoi could feel free to step up the pace at any time. One could infer from present levels that Hanoi is trying to coordinate infiltration with a forthcoming negotiating strategy. It could also mean that, because he has taken high losses in South Vietnam including significant losses in combat leadership, he is not prepared to take comparable losses over the long-run while following a negotiating strategy.

The economic price or "strain" imposed on the North was substantial but not critical. The small, modern NVN industrial sector was made largely inoperable, but essential needs for manufactures were met by a stream of military and economic goods imported from the USSR and Communist China, rising to some \$1-billion-worth a year. Civilian casualties were small -- and kept by us as small as we reasonably could. NVN manpower needs were met by the natural increase in the working population and diversion from the normally under-employed agricultural work force, with substitution of women for men in many jobs.

6. Pacification

Called by any name -- the "other war" or "revolutionary development" -- pacification is perhaps the most difficult area to evaluate in Vietnam. More than any other aspect of the war, we have continually over-estimated the degree to which the countryside was "pacified." The question is not which side has "more" control, access, sympathy or support in a given area. The key test is whether VC guerrillas can get what they need, to survive, expand and operate, in areas unoccupied by friendly regular forces. In most places, they can. A key indicator of rural security is whether a GVN official can stay at night in his hamlet or village. By and large, away from district and province towns (except for certain religious sect areas), he cannot.

The goal of "pacification" is to make the rural populated areas a dangerous, inhospitable environment for VC agents, guerrillas and regional forces, by a combination of military and police activity and public cooperation in the form of self-defense, resistance to communist demands and initiative in informing authorities. But neither military nor police requirements have ever been met even moderately; not has much willing cooperation ever been won, in the face of effective Communist threats, from a rural public mainly apathetic or allergic to both sides. As a result, the VC have been able to move freely at night in most rural areas of SVN -- while GVN militia and officials do not -- and to get all the help and information from the public they need. Areas of relative security for a GVN (day and night) presence have reflected occupation, i.e., local saturation with regular troops, rather than "pacification," which, in short, has simply not taken place. In these fundamental terms, our side has neither gained much nor lost much (except, periodically, illusions) in the countryside in the last eight years.

A major reason is the pervasiveness and competence of the Communist subversive apparatus, which can generally be said to "out-administer" the GVN. Viet Cong infrastructure, that is, their political-military organization which takes the form of shadow governments throughout the countryside, exists in 80% of the hamlets, and the better our intelligence becomes the more extensive we find this infrastructure to be. It is estimated that 65% of the total population and 81% of the rural population is subject to some degree of VC influence by the infrastructure. It lays down laws, drafts recruits, and collects taxes in most parts of the country every bit as efficiently if not more so than the GVN. GVN political administrative organs cannot match, and have made little effort to match, this degree of political effectiveness.

At lower levels, hamlet and villages, the GVN apparatus is actually less complex than the Communist, and at all levels up through district and province tends to be less energetic, less informed, less experienced, and less native to and familiar with the area. In terms of population reliability and responsiveness, the situation has remained constant. Experienced people in Vietnam guess that the Viet Cong and the GVN each have about three to four million "loyalists," and that the rest of the population either attempts to remain neutral or swings from time to time toward force majeure. The people remain uncommitted. By traditional means of evaluating pacification, that is, the Hamlet Evaluation System, the situation looks better for the GVN, but even here the meaning of the statistics is questionable. As of November 1968, A, B and C hamlets accounted for 73% of the population. But the key categories to look at are the A and B hamlets, and here the GVN has only about 25% of the total population, roughly the same percentage as in January 1967. Hamlets classified as "C" are really being contested and are still subject to VC influence.

A current "Accelerated Pacification Program" is expanding GVN presence, in the form of militia detachments, in contested hamlets: a useful precursor to a possible ceasefire, but no real basis for improvement in rural security. The program includes a crash effort to "neutralize" VC Infrastructure (VCI), but it is still unclear just how this is interpreted by field officials: other than as assassination or arrest of persons moving at night or found on local, highly-padded lists of "unverified" VCI. That many hard-core Communist cadre or higher-level officials (as distinct from draft dodgers, persons lacking ID cards, personal enemies of local authorities, members of village "people's organizations," coerced laborers for the VC, or more usefully, couriers) will be eliminated, or the Communist apparatus significantly damaged, by such a program is very doubtful.

Crash drives by "amateur police" can produce, on schedule, reports of success, but are no substitute for the patient, coordinated, professional police/intelligence effort against the Communist subversive apparatus that has never been mounted in Vietnam and that must be at the heart of an effective counterinsurgency campaign. Coordination of intelligence for such an effort is just now, at last, beginning, still mainly on the U.S. side, and it cannot be assumed that it will spread to the GVN effort.

In sum, we still cannot be confident that our South Vietnamese allies, or ourselves, know how to pacify, or can come to do what it takes.